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Kalevala — the National Epic of Finland

by WILFRID BONSER

FINNISH epic poetry is still known to comparatively few: yet the Kalevala, as the chief narrative poem is called, has been given a place by Max Müller as the fifth great national epic of the world, side by side with the *Iliad*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Shahnameh* and the *Nibelungenlied*.

Since it extends to over 22,000 lines, some perseverance is required to read it through in its entirety: but it is so interesting and so quaint, and at the same time so beautiful, that it deserves to be far better known than it is at present.

There were until recently only two complete translations of the Kalevala into English. The earlier is that of John Martin Crawford, published in two volumes in New York in 1889. The other is that of W. F. Kirby, which appeared in two volumes of the Everyman's Library in 1907. Crawford's translation is by far the more readable, but is, unfortunately, out of print and difficult to obtain: Kirby's is more accessible, but it is very dull reading, in spite of the hope expressed in its preface that 'elegance' has not been sacrificed by the translator's attempt at verse. The great demerit in Crawford's translation is the scansion of the Finnish names. He puts the accent on the penultimate syllable, following the more general custom in English names: but the stress, or at least the main stress, should be on the first syllable invariably — *Ímatra*, *Júmala*, *Póhyola*, and not *Imátra*, *Jumála* and *Pohyóla*, as in Crawford's version. The word *Káleva* itself should have the main stress on the first syllable. I shall, however, quote usually from Crawford's translation rather than Kirby's, and so have to scan *Kalevála*, etc.

But in the autumn of 1964 a new translation, by Francis Peabody Magoun, was published by Harvard University Press. It is a line for line translation, but in prose. I have not quoted from it as

it lacks the movement of the Kalevala metre and is so involved that it cannot be read aloud with comprehension. It is, however, invaluable to the serious student.

The name Kalevala signifies the 'land of heroes' from *kaleva*, a hero, to which is added the suffix 'la', which is equivalent to the Norse 'heim'. It is used allegorically for 'Finland' and has been given to the epic to show its national character.

The poem consists of fifty runes, or cantos, plus proem and epilogue. It tells the story of the three national heroes of Finland, whose home was in Kalevala or Suomi in the south, and of their exploits against Pohyola, the land of darkness and forests in the north. These three heroes are Vainamoinen, Ilmarinen and Lemminkainen: they have many magical powers with which to contend against the counter-magic of Louhi, the 'hostess', as she is called, of Pohyola. Some of these names are now familiar in England owing to their appearance in the works of Sibelius. Vainamoinen is a minstrel who accomplishes his magic by means of his singing. He is endowed with the wisdom of an old man, and at the same time with the heart and bodily vigour of a young one. Ilmarinen is a blacksmith, or, perhaps more accurately, a craftsman in metals, who forges wonders. Lemminkainen, though a hero and brave in his exploits, is a reckless youth, who, by his wantonness, causes much trouble both for himself and for others. All three heroes go to Pohyola for the purpose of winning a bride, for besides being a land of dark enchantments, Pohyola possesses the most beautiful of maidens, whom all the heroes desire to win. Vainamoinen and Ilmarinen are both heroes of a glorified type, while Lemminkainen, who (at least in the original songs from which the Kalevala was composed) is but rarely found in company of the other two, is of a more popular type.

But, besides telling of the exploits of these three heroes, the poem incidentally affords us most valuable information on the manners and customs and on the religion of the ancient Finns: in fact it is our most important record of their primitive condition.

Their early religion, which still lingers in the country parts in spirit, was Shamanism. This was a belief in sorcery: magic is its very essence, and spells are its liturgy. It is still the religion of northern Siberia, and the Finns' belief in it dates back to the time when they were still an Asiatic tribe in the steppe between the

Altai and the Urals. The spirit of Shamanism, overlaid in parts with a thin veneer of Christianity, is the spirit of the Kalevala, its greatest written monument. It is impossible to obtain any true insight into the epic without always bearing this in mind. Everything was possessed of a spirit, which it was possible to influence by means of magic.¹ In the Kalevala, therefore, the sorcerer takes the place usually held in other epics by the warrior or king.

The gods of the Kalevala were almost all nature deities. Ukko, or Jumala, the supreme god of the sky, is the most important. The Finnish shaman was supposed to derive his power from him. After him come Tápío, god of the forests, Ahto, god of the waters, and Tuóni, god of the dead. Tápiola, the forest, is the home of Tápío, and Tuónela, the home of the departed, is the kingdom of Tuóni.

Since the Finns belong to the Ugrian group of peoples, one might expect to find that their legends and myths differ largely from those of their Aryan neighbours. But it is remarkable how much they have in common with the legends of other races. It is probable, however, that but little of the mythology of the Kalevala has been directly borrowed. The Finns were too isolated in early times for this, and it is not until comparatively modern times that their connections with their neighbours allow of such transference. In some cases, however, especially after the introduction of Christianity by Sweden in the twelfth century, foreign influence, and mostly Scandinavian, is traceable. That of the Slavs from the east and that of the Lithuanians from the south-west, may also be seen, but the legends of these peoples were merely added to those already existing.

There is a large stock of legend, resulting chiefly from the observation of nature, which is the common property of mankind in general, and this stock when drawn upon by different peoples, is influenced and modified by the physical and other conditions of the countries inhabited by those different peoples. For instance, in the present case, the situation of Finland in the far north has naturally influenced the nature of the Finnish sun-myths. The long winter and short summer, with the very rapid transitions from the one to the other, gave rise to the Finnish story of the theft

¹ Magoun gives an index of over fifty charms and incantations contained in the poem.

of the sun and moon, as is told in rune 47 of the Kalevala. Again, since snow is on the ground in Finland for a large part of the year, the most usual method of travel is by sledge or by running on snow shoes, and not by horse, as in other epics. The many lakes and the vast forests also make Finnish myths different from those of races who do not come in contact with these features.

The runes of which the Kalevala is composed were collected from the mouths of the people themselves and welded together to form a consecutive epic poem by Elias Lönnrot, over a century ago. (It was published in 1835 and enlarged later.) He claimed to have done for the Kalevala, as he named his poem, what Peisistratos did for the Iliad: he gave it its final literary form. Till his time, the runes, not yet united, had been preserved from generation to generation, by being sung by bards or *runoias*² to beguile the long winter evenings. This accounts for the existence of the many variants from which Lönnrot made his selection; for each reciter would improvise where he thought fit, or where his memory failed him. Lönnrot, in his literary form, has chosen the variant which fits best into his framework, and suits the Kalevala as a whole.³ Besides the Kalevala itself, he has also published the various sources from which he composed it. These consist of collections of lyrics, proverbs, magic songs and so on.⁴

It will be noticed that the metre of the Kalevala is familiar, since it is the same as that employed by Longfellow for 'Hiawatha'. It is said that the reading of the German translation of the Kalevala inspired Longfellow to write his poem. He copied the Kalevala as to form and metre, and for his matter he used the myths of the north American Indians. The prairie took the place of the Finnish forests, but the natural features of the country around Lake Superior, the 'Shining Big-Sea-Water', are in many ways similar to, and as primitive as, those of Finland and its lakes.

The poem opens with a proem:

Golden friend and dearest brother, . . .
Come and sing with me the stories . . .
Legends of the times forgotten . . .

² Originally signifying a 'singer of magic charms'.

³ 'A few hundred linking verses are all that he really added of his own.'—Magoun.

⁴ Magoun gives a map to show the travels of Lönnrot over Finland and Lapland in this field-work.

Let us clasp our hands together
That we thus may best remember.

The story told in the 50 runes or cantos of the Kalevala may be divided into 10 episodes. The first rune gives the Finnish version of the story of the Creation, followed by the birth of Vainamoinen. The second episode introduces the chief theme of the epic, namely the voyaging of Vainamoinen, and later of the blacksmith Ilmarinen, to Pohyola in order to win a bride. This leads to the forging by Ilmarinen of the magic Sampo, the 'Holy Grail' of Finland, which is asked for by the maiden's mother as a trial of skill.

But while Ilmarinen in fulfilling the behest of the mother, Vainamoinen is busy fulfilling three behests for the maiden herself. Louhi, the mother, entertains Vainamoinen on his first visit, and sends him home, laying the embargo upon him, not to look upwards on his journey, or dire misfortune will befall him.

But Louhi's daughter sits upon the Rainbow, 'weaving webs of golden texture'. Vainamoinen, returning homewards, hears her plying the shuttle, and forgetful of Louhi's instructions, looks upwards, and sees her 'on the highest arch resplendent'. He stops and accosts her:

'Come, fair maiden, to my snow-sledge
By my side I wish thee seated . . .
Come with me, and I will make thee
Wife and queen in Kalevala.'

She replies that a thrush has told her that the life of wives is drudgery. Nevertheless, she sets him three tasks whereby to win her, as does the orthodox fairy princess. The first two tasks are easily accomplished, but the third takes time. She says:

'I will go with that man only
That will make me ship or shallop,
From the splinters of my spindle,
From the fragments of my distaff:
In the waters launch the vessel . . .
Using not the knee to push it, . . .
Using not the hand to touch it,
Using nothing to propel it.'

Rune 16 opens with Vainamoinen building the boat which the Maiden of the Rainbow demanded. As the timber fails,

Vainamoinen sends Pellervoinen, 'The sower of the forests', to cut timber for him. Here follows some proverbial wisdom as to the suitability of wood for boat-building, told, in epic fashion, by the trees themselves. Pellervoinen approaches the aspen, axe in hand: the tree says:

'All the boats that have been fashioned
From my wood have proved but failures;
Such a vessel floats a distance,
Then it sinks upon the bottom
Of the waters it should travel.
All my trunk is filled with hollows,
Three times in the summer seasons
Worms devour my stem and branches.'

Similarly, the pine-tree declares itself unsuitable owing to the ravens who,

'Build their nests and hatch their young ones
Three times in my trunk in summer.'

But the oak declares itself as suitable, since it has no flaws within its body. Vainamoinen therefore builds his boat of oak. It must be remembered that until the Kalevala was written down, the wisdom of the Finns was stored in the various songs of which it was composed, and which were committed to memory and repeated by the singers. Information like the foregoing was thus passed on from generation to generation.

Vainamoinen finds, however, that three magical words are wanted, which will tell him how to finish off the stern of his vessel. It should be noted that it is the *word* that is all-important, as is the case with the magic of other races. Two runes tell of his search for these words before the boat — and the story — may proceed.

He decides to journey to Tuonela, the kingdom of Tuoni, the god of the dead, to find the missing words of magic. After three weeks' journey, he comes to the death-stream which surrounds the kingdom of the dead. He summons Tuoni's daughter to ferry him across. Tuonetar, the 'hostess' of Deathland, welcomes him and offers him beer to drink. Vainamoinen carefully inspects it first, and finding frogs, lizards and other reptiles at the bottom of the pitcher refuses it. Tuonetar then asks him his purpose. He tells her and she replies that he will never return to his home: at the

same time she waves her magic wand of slumber and puts him to sleep. While he sleeps, Tuoni's son, a cross-eyed person, 'with crooked fingers, iron-pointed, copper fingers', puts a thousand nets with iron meshes into the death-stream. Vainamoinen awakes, and scenting danger, changes his form into that of a serpent — 'slips into another body'. Thus he wriggles like a worm through the nets, and when Tuoni's son hastens in the early morning to catch his prey, he finds that he has escaped him.

Homer sent Odysseus down to Hades and each epic poet since has made his hero descend to the infernal regions for some purpose. Rune 16 may be said to represent the Kalevala version of this — though it is probable that the Finnish singers were unacquainted with the *Odyssey*. The approach to Tuonela is across the death-stream which corresponds to the classic Styx and the Norse Gjaller-bru; but the Finns imagined a 'tiny maiden' to take the dead across in place of the old man Charon. It is noticeable that Vainamoinen while in Tuonela refuses sustenance when it is offered to him. Similarly, during the visit of Psyche to Hades in the 'Golden Ass' of Apuleius, she refuses the refreshment offered her by Proserpina, preferring bread only since she had been previously warned of the consequences. When Hermod went to Helheim to bring back Balder, he fared no better than Vainamoinen, since Hunger was the table at which he sat, and Burning Thirst the wine that Hela provided. The Norse story is allegorical and therefore not so primitive as that of the Kalevala.

But to return to our story and rune 17. A shepherd tells Vainamoinen that he can find the magic words he requires to make his boat from Vipunen, a dead song-giant, and offers to show him the way to the grave. The way is 'on the sharpened points of needles . . . on the edges of the broadswords . . . on the edges of the hatchets'. Vainamoinen gets Ilmarinen, therefore, to make him a coat of armour and shoes, gloves and staff — all of metal. The journey takes three days.

Wise Vipunen, wisdom-singer,
Ancient bard and great magician,
With his magic songs lay yonder;
Stretched beside him lay his sayings.
On his shoulder grew the aspen,
On each temple grew a birch-tree,

On his mighty chin the alder,
And the oak-tree from his fore-head.

Vainamoinen fells the trees. He thrusts his iron staff into the giant's mouth, prises his mighty jaws asunder and bids him rise. Vipunen opens his mouth in his anguish, and Vainamoinen, stumbling, falls in and is swallowed — armour, staff and all. Inside the giant, he considers how he shall live and from the handle of his poniard he builds a ship by magic. Vipunen, however, suffers no inconvenience as yet, but when Vainamoinen sets up a smithy inside him,

Forges one day, then a second,
Forges till the third day closes, . . .
In the sorcerer's abdomen,

then Vipunen, in a speech of nearly 300 lines tells him to get out and go home, or he will tell his mother about him: he prays, threatens, abuses and bribes him to go. When at last he stops, Vainamoinen informs him that he will not go until he tells him his wisdom sayings. Vipunen then sings him all his wisdom, and opens his mouth for him to come forth.

'Thou hast found what thou desirest,
Found the three words of the Master;
Go in peace, and ne'er returning,
Take my blessing on thy going.'

Vainamoinen, at last satisfied, comes out and returns to Kalevala. He now finishes his boat, having fulfilled all the conditions required in building it.

Thus the third task was completed.
Dowry for the Maid of Beauty,
Sitting on the arch of heaven,
On the bow of many colours.

Rune 17 is perhaps the most curious in the poem: it is full of surprises, not the least one being the placing of Vainamoinen in the same predicament as the prophet Jonah. The visit to Vipunen has several parallels. Hiawatha's fishing results in a similar experience: a sturgeon swallows the hero, together with his boat and the squirrel which was sitting on the bows with tail erect. The story reminds one also of the visit of Odin to the grave of the dead

Vala to enquire of her if Balder is about to die — which has been retold by the poet Gray. A still more modern story of the same sort is in the second canto of the Lay of the last Minstrel, wherein is described the visit of William of Deloraine to the grave of the wizard Michael Scott, at whose side lies buried his book of wisdom. A third parallel may be found in the Norse lay of the 'Waking of Angantyr', in which his daughter Hervor repairs to his grave, where he lies 'under the roots of the trees' in the island full of death-fires and where the dead are astir.

Ilmarinen has complied with the conditions imposed by Louhi, the mother of the maiden, and Vainamoinen, wooing her personally, has fulfilled those imposed by the maiden herself. Vainamoinen in his magic vessel sets out for Pohyola. Ilmarinen's sister, Annikki, doing her washing, like the princess Nausicaa in the Odyssey, 'on a headland jutting seaward' sees him as he is going past. She leaves her washing and goes to the smithy to tell her brother. Ilmarinen at once prepares to go to Pohyola too. Annikki brings him his best clothes:

Brought to him his silken stockings,
 Brought him shoes of marten-leather,
 Brought a vest of sky-blue colour,
 Brought him scarlet coloured trousers . . .
 Brought a red shawl trimmed in ermine,
 Fourfold wrapped around his body:
 Brought a fur-coat made of seal skin
 Fastened with a thousand buttons . . .
 Then a high crowned hat she brought him
 That his ancient father purchased
 When he first began his wooing.

He orders his servant to harness his swiftest horse to his sledge, and to place six cuckoos on the breakboard and seven blue-birds on the crossbeam,

Thus to charm the Northland maidens,
 Thus to make them look and listen
 As the cuckoos call and echo.

He overtakes Vainamoinen on the third day and proposes they should both peaceably woo the maiden. Vainamoinen agrees.

Vainamoinen first enters, and tells how he has fulfilled the tasks

laid upon him. He is, however, rejected by the maiden in favour of Ilmarinen, and returns alone to Kalevala.

The poet goes on to

Sing of Ilmarinen's marriage
To the Maiden of the Rainbow,
Fairest daughter of the Northland,
Sing the drinking songs of Pohya.

Louhi prepares for the wedding. The ox selected for the marriage-feast is so large that it took a squirrel thirty days to travel from the tail to the shoulders! The brewing of the large quantity of beer required takes a whole summer. The marriage customs and feast are duly described and much good advice is offered to both bridegroom and bride. The maiden then says farewell and departs with her husband.

There is no space to tell of runes 26 to 49, and I will turn to the final rune of the Kalevala, which is in many respects the most interesting of them all. It tells of the coming of the hero, born of the virgin Mariatta — or Márjatta as she should be called — and of the consequent departure of Vainamoinen.

Mariatta, 'Child of Beauty', lives as an innocent shepherdess with her parents. As she sits one day on a hillock in the forest, she speaks her thoughts aloud:

'Call to me, thou golden cuckoo, . . .
Tell how long must I unmarried,
As a shepherdess neglected
Wander o'er these hills and mountains'.

She has not long to wait for an answer, for a mountain-berry calls to her to pluck it, and take it to her bosom — it perches a moment on her lips. She swallows it and thus becomes 'a bride impregnate, wedded to the mountain-berry'. To her mother's questioning she replies:

'I am not a bride unworthy,
Am not wedded to dishonour;
I shall bear a noble hero,
I shall bear a son immortal
Who shall rule among the mighty,
Rule the ancient Vainamoinen'.

She is driven from her father's house, since he refuses her the use

of his bathroom (*sauna*). Among the Finns the steam from a hot bath was considered necessary to facilitate the birth of a child. Márjatta seeks in vain for a place in which to be delivered and finally sends her servant to an individual named Ruotas. His wife replies that all her bathrooms are full, but that there is a stable in the forest:

‘In the stable is a manger,
Fitting birth-place for the hero.’

Thither she goes, with a prayer for help to the supreme god Ukko. The horse breathes upon her, and so keeps her warm: it is a substitute for the steam of the bathroom. The babe is born, but disappears while his mother is asleep. She seeks for him everywhere in vain, under the sieve, under the willow-basket, in the grass, within the clumps of flowers. A star ‘comes to meet her’ and she asks it where the babe is. It answers:

‘If I knew, I would not tell thee;
’Tis thy child that me created,
Set me here to watch at evening, . . .
Here to twinkle in the darkness.’

She asks the Moon, who answers:

‘If I knew, I would not tell thee,
’Tis thy child that me created,
Here to wander in the darkness, . . .
Shining for the good of others’.

She asks the Sun, who answers:

‘Yonder is thy golden infant,
There thy holy babe lies sleeping . . .
Hidden in the reeds and rushes.’

She then takes him home with her to her father’s dwelling, where he grows in beauty, strength and wisdom.

She now asks Virokannas, ‘of the wilderness the ruler’, as priest, to baptise him, but he refuses to do so till the child be examined, ‘less he prove the son of witchcraft’. Vainamoinen is called upon to examine him, and recommends that he be slain, as an outcast. The child, now two weeks old, retorts that he, Vainamoinen, had not been punished according to his deserts, nor banished, nor

illtreated. Virokannas then baptises him, and gives him his blessing, with the rights of royal heirship.

Vainamoinen gives up what will prove an unequal contest, and departs.

Westward, westward, sailed the hero
O'er the blue-black of the waters, . . .
Sailing through the dusk of evening,
Sailing to the fiery sunset,
To the higher-landed regions,
To the lower verge of heaven; . . .
But he left his harp of magic,
To the lasting joy of Suomi.

This last rune of the Kalevala stands by itself, and its insertion by Lönnrot as the concluding scene is very effective. He has combined two lays, one of which tells of the birth of the Wonder-child and one which tells of the judgement and departure of Vainamoinen. In one original of the latter lay the babe is fatherless and found in a pond. He is never named king of Carelia as in the Kalevala, but king of Metsola (the woodlands).

While it has many points in common with the usual pagan wonder-child story, still its similarity to the Gospel story will be seen at once. The name of Ruotas, in whose stable the child is born, is the same word as Herod, according to commentators, and Virokannas, who is an agricultural deity of the ancient Finns, here plays the part of John the Baptist. Márjatta may be the same name as Mary, but is more probably derived from the Finnish *márja*, a berry, especially since it is a berry which she swallows in order to become the mother of the wonder-child.⁵ Stress is laid on the purity necessary for the virgin-mother. The *motif* of conception through eating a berry is also found in the legends of other races, e.g. in India and China. The ancestress of the late Manchu dynasty was a heavenly maiden who by eating a berry given her by a magpie became the mother of the hero who was to restore peace to his people.

Another comparable story occurs in the 30th chapter of Genesis. It tells how 'Rachel ate of the mandrakes which her sister had given her, and having eaten of them, she also conceived, and bare a son,

⁵ In Finnish *punaapuola*. Its nearest English equivalent is a cranberry, but it is smaller and sweeter.

and she called his name Joseph'. Sir James Frazer thinks that in the original narrative, Rachel's pregnancy was due merely to her eating the yellow *berries* of the mandrake.⁶

The departure of Vainamoinen is very similar to that of Hiawatha,

'In the glory of the sunset,
In the purple mists of evening . . .
To the Islands of the Blessed . . .
To the land of the Hereafter.'

The streamers that form on the sea after a storm are still called by the Finns the tracks of Vainamoinen's boat.

The epilogue, added by Lönnrot, follows this rune and ends the epic. Its purport is that these fifty runes do not by any means exhaust the legends of which the singer can tell. The rest, however, he will not tell now, but will roll into a ball for some future occasion when his audience shall return.

For the wise and worthy singer
Sings not all his garnered wisdom;
Better leave unsung some sayings
Than to sing them out of season.

⁶ Frazer, 'Jacob and the mandrakes'. Proc. British Academy, viii, 1917.